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## THE POETRY OF WILLIAM WATSON.

The death of Lord Tennyson in 1892 called forth from his poetical contemporaries a number of eulogies, very few of which were remarkable either for the originality of their thought or the excellence of their verse. Among these few, however, was one that received the unstinted praise of Mr. Gladstone, then Prime Minister. It was the work of a poet unknown to him—so unknown, in fact, that he had to buy the poet's works and read them just as Sir Robert Peel had done in the case of Tennyson more than forty years before. A perusal of these deepened the impression already made, and in acknowledgement of their excellence he offered the author—Mr. William Watson—a pension of £200 in the Civil List. The offer and its acceptance caused no little unfavorable comment at the time, a writer in *The National Observer* declaring that the pension was “a direct insult to literature.” But a calmer judgment will realize the justice of the gift, for among the many poets that have emerged from the shadow of Tennyson's great name no other is more gifted or has given promise of more true poetical power than Mr. Watson.

Only the most meagre facts of his life are known. The son of a Liverpool merchant, he was born near that city in 1858. Being a delicate child, he was unable to attend the public schools, though as a boy he enjoyed intimate communion with the world of nature and of books. He was an omnivorous reader, especially of the great poets, and his love of these is shown by the wealth of allusion in his poems. Much of his youth was also spent, we are told, in some of the most beautiful scenery of England—in rambles along the Lancashire sea-coast and in excursions into the country immortalized by Wordsworth. Yet despite this constant communion with nature it is a singular fact that hardly a picture of nature is to be found in any of his

poems. His genius was largely introspective, and dwelt almost entirely on what he had read, and not what he had seen.

Mr. Watson's first literary productions appeared in *The Argus*, a weekly journal published in Liverpool. These took the form of short lyrics, showing the influence of Shelley, and a series of prose articles on "The German Musical Composers," "distinguished," says his friend Mr. James Ashcroft Noble, "by maturity of thought and expression remarkable in the work of a mere youth." He was an enthusiast on the subject of music, and his criticisms of Beethoven, Mozart, and others were singularly just and acute.

In 1880 Mr. Watson published, through Messrs. Kegan Paul & Co., his first volume, "The Prince's Quest and Other Poems." The book dropped almost stillborn from the press, a not unnatural thing with first volumes of verse, and it took almost twelve years to exhaust one small edition. Doubtless since Mr. Watson has become famous, the edition is eagerly sought after by the book-lovers, not because it is rare poetry, but because it is a rare book. So the world goes. The longest poem of the volume, "The Prince's Quest," reminds one strongly of Keats's "Endymion," though no *Quarterly* reviewer, "so savage and tartarly," tore it into shreds. It caught the fancy of Dante Rossetti and his school, and that fastidious poet said of it: "It takes one straight back to Keats." Despite such distinguished association the poem almost provokes one into saying: "If its length be not considered a merit, it hath no other." But it has some undeniable merit. The verse is smooth and musical enough, and the language is restrained; in fact, the poet even thus early shows that characteristic which so distinguished him afterwards: self-restraint. On the other hand, the plot is rather vague, and the verdict of the reader may be taken in evidence against it: no one cares to read it a second time. It is simply interesting as the youthful effort of a poet who has since done noble work in a differ-

ent line of poetry, but it is as far from "Wordsworth's Grave" as "Endymion" is from "The Eve of St. Agnes."

If Mr. Watson at first made a failure with a long poem, he soon went to the other extreme and wrote the shortest of short poems—the epigram. In 1884 he published a volume of these — one hundred in number,—entitled "Epigrams on Art, Life, and Nature," but this little book, too, was passed by unheeded. Yet in these epigrams he strikes the keynote of much he has since written. In this peculiar form no other English poet has excelled him for beauty of setting and thought, incisiveness of expression, and exquisite blending of words and ideas. So saturated did he become with the epigrammatic spirit that many of the stanzas of his longer poems resolve themselves unconsciously into epigrams. Prof. Dowden has devoted pages to the tragic episode of Shelley and Harriet Westbrook; here is Mr. Watson's marvellous rendering of the whole story:

A star look'd down from heaven and loved a flower  
Grown in earth's garden — loved it for an hour:  
Let eyes that trace his orbit in the spheres  
Refuse not, to a ruin'd rosebud, tears.

Where can one find a more adequate and beautiful tribute to Longfellow?

No puissant singer he, whose silence grieves  
To-day the great West's tender heart and strong:  
No singer vast of voice: yet one who leaves  
His native air the sweeter for his song.

Other epigrams are as exquisite in their finish:

Toiling and yearning, 'tis man's doom to see  
No perfect creature fashion'd of his hands.  
Insulted by a flower's immaculacy,  
And mock'd at by the flawless stars he stands.

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One music maketh its occult abode  
In all things scatter'd from great Beauty's hand;  
And evermore the deepest words of God  
Are yet the easiest to understand.

## THE CATHEDRAL SPIRE.

It soars like hearts of hapless men who dare  
 To sue for gifts the gods refuse to allot;  
 Who climb forever toward they know not where,  
 Baffled forever by they know not what.

It may be noted that the latest edition of Mr. Watson's poems gives only fifty of the epigrams. This is another instance of the poet's self-restraint, as well as an instance of that pardonable weakness of many writers which causes them to esteem as worst what all the world thinks best. For it is undoubtedly true that of the epigrams omitted some are much finer than many of those retained, beautiful as are these latter. One example will suffice:

"How weak are words—to carry thoughts like mine?"  
 Saith each dull dangler round the much-bored Nine.  
 Yet words sufficed for Shakspeare's suit when he  
 Woo'd Time, and won instead Eternity.

Undismayed, as it seemed, by two failures, Mr. Watson published in the *National Review*, during 1885, a series of sonnets, entitled "Ver Tenebrosum," in which he arraigned the government for the war in Egypt and the bombardment of Alexandria. These sonnets, especially those on Gordon, were full of vigor, and the critics praised them warmly. But the general public was untouched, and even Mr. Gladstone evidently paid no heed. This neglect may have been due to the fact that sonnets written for a purpose hardly ever succeed, or that Mr. Watson, like Tennyson and Browning, lacked facility as a sonneteer,—probably the latter is the true reason, though one, "To Lord Tennyson," shows that he could strike for once a rich note in that very difficult of poetic strains:

Master and mage, our prince of song, whom Time,  
 In this your autumn mellow and serene,  
 Crowns ever with fresh laurels, nor less green  
 Than garlands dewy from your verdurous prime;  
 Heir of the riches of the whole world's rhyme,  
 Dow'r'd with the Doric grace, the Mantuan mien,  
 With Arno's depth and Avon's golden sheen;  
 Singer to whom the singing ages climb,

Convergent; — if the youngest of the choir  
May snatch a flying splendor from your name  
Making his page illustrious, and aspire  
For one rich moment your regard to claim,  
Suffer him at your feet to lay his lyre  
And touch the skirts and fringes of your fame.

Mr. Watson scored his first success as a poet by the publication, in 1889, of "Wordsworth's Grave and Other Poems." Amid the quantity of verse that appeared at the time, the critics, both here and in England, recognized the fresh tone, the cultivated expression, and the striking beauty of the poems that made up the volume. It was a belated recognition, and it came none too soon. Mr. Howells in the Editor's Study of *Harper's*, an acute critic in the *Atlantic*, and Mr. Grant Allen in the *Fortnightly Review* led in the bestowal of praise on the new poet. To apply his own words to himself, it had been long since "so sweet, so true" a note had been heard from a new poet.

Mr. Watson followed his first success with the publication, just after the Laureate's death, of the elegy that has been referred to, and so hearty was the praise accorded to this noble poem that he was mentioned by many as the probable successor to the laureateship. But soon the dark shadow of insanity settled over his genius. Many reasons for this sudden calamity have been assigned, but it seems that it was, as his friend Mr. Noble said, "largely, if not wholly, due to the excitement born of sudden success after long years spent in apparently vain attempts to catch the ear of the reading public." Be that as it may, the mental obscuration fortunately lasted only a short while, and, early in 1893, the poet published a new and revised edition of his poems in response to a general demand. This was soon followed by "The Eloping Angels: a Caprice," which his admirers fervently wish he had never written. In the fall of the same year came his first and only prose work, "Excursions in Criticism: Being Some Prose Recreations of a Rhymer." Besides these volumes of original work, he has edited, with appropriate introductions, "English Lyrics" by Mr. Alfred

Austin (1890) and "Lyric Love: an Anthology" (1892), the latter being in the *Golden Treasury Series*.

Omitting the sonnets and epigrams, Mr. Watson's poetry may be roughly divided into three classes: elegiac, narrative, and miscellaneous lyrics; and, in discussing these, it may be well to speak of them in order of merit, beginning with the least important. This is the narrative poetry, which may be dismissed in a few words. "The Prince's Quest" has already been commented on, while "Angelo," printed in the same volume, has not been thought worthy of preservation in the latest edition. "The Eloping Angels" is a most disappointing production. The plot borders on irreverence, the action is none of the clearest, the humor is rather heavy and far-fetched, reminding one in spots of Hood's labored attempts at fun, and the verse is in no way remarkable. It is a pity the poet did not exercise before publication that self-restraint which, as has been noted, he displays elsewhere.

The miscellaneous lyrics included in Mr. Watson's latest edition are not numerous, but their quality is very high. In "Autumn" he gives about the only touch of nature found in his poems. One is reminded of Matthew Arnold in these lines:

Stilled is the virgin rapture that was June,  
And cold is August's panting heart of fire;  
And in the storm-dismantled forest choir  
For thine own elegy thy winds attune  
    Their wild and wizard lyre:  
  
And poignant grows the charm of thy decay,  
The pathos of thy beauty, and the sting,  
Thou parable of greatness vanishing!  
For me, thy woods of gold and skies of grey  
    With speech fantastic ring.

"Felicity" reminds one even more of the same poet. "The Things that are More Excellent" is an earnest plea for freedom of thought and action, a discontent with the humdrum cant and fashions of the day. These stanzas show the spirit of the poet:

The grace of friendship — mind and heart  
    Linked with their fellow heart and mind ;  
The gains of science, gifts of art ;  
    The sense of oneness with our kind ;  
The thirst to know and understand —  
    A large and liberal discontent :  
These are the goods in life's rich hand,  
    The things that are more excellent.

In faultless rhythm the ocean rolls,  
    A rapturous silence fills the skies ;  
And on this earth are lovely souls,  
    That softly look with aidful eyes.  
Though dark, O God, Thy course and track.  
    I think Thou must at least have meant  
That nought which lives should wholly lack  
    The things that are most excellent.

Other notable lyrics are "The Fugitive Ideal," "Song" ("Lightly we met in the Morn"), "Beauty's Metempsychosis," "England to Ireland," "The Great Misgiving," "The Raven's Shadow," and "Lux Perdita." But Mr. Watson's critical judgment, so keen in passing on others, was again at fault when it came to himself; for he has omitted from his latest edition several poems that are worthy of preservation. An example is seen in "A Song of Three Singers," which is the most melodious poem he has yet written :

Wave and wind and willow tree  
Speak a speech that no man knoweth ;  
Tree that sigheth, wind that bloweth,  
    Wave that floweth to the sea :  
Wave and wind and willow-tree.

Peerless perfect poets ye,  
Singing songs all songs excelling,  
Fine as crystal music dwelling  
    In a welling fountain free :  
Peerless perfect poets three !

Wave and wind and willow-tree  
Know not aught of poets' rhyming,  
Yet they make a silver-chiming  
    Sunward-climbing minstrelsy,  
Soother than all songs could be.



Blows the wind it knows not why,  
 Flows the wave it knows not whither,  
 And the willow swayeth hither,  
     Swayeth thither witlessly,  
 Nothing knowing save to sigh.

There has been great rejoicing among the critics because Mr. Watson has left out of his latest edition his rather amusing poem on Mr. Oscar Wilde, entitled "Lines to our New Censor." To me, however, it seems too good to be consigned to oblivion, for it shows Mr. Watson in a new role — that of humorous poet. It was written, so the introductory note says, because Mr. Wilde, having discovered that England was unworthy of him, had announced his resolve to become a naturalized Frenchman.

And wilt thou, Oscar, from us flee,  
     And must we, henceforth, wholly sever?  
 Shall thy laborious *jeux-d'esprit*  
     Sadden our lives no more forever?

And all thy future wilt thou link  
     With that brave land to which thou goest?  
 Unhappy France! we *used* to think  
     She touched, at Sedan, fortune's lowest.

And you're made French as easily  
     As you might change the clothes you're wearing?  
 Fancy: — and 'tis so hard to be  
     A man of sense and modest bearing.

May fortitude beneath this blow  
     Fail not the gallant Gallic nation!  
 By past experience, well we know  
     Her genius for recuperation.

And as for us — to our disgrace,  
     Your stricture's truth must be conceded:  
 Would any but a stupid race  
     Have made the fuss about you *we* did?

As we have seen, Mr. Watson failed to catch the popular ear with his narrative poems, his epigrams, and his sonnets, but when he published an elegiac poem his success was assured. In this kind of poetry he found his true element,

and as an elegiac poet he will long continue to hold an "unassailable and sovereign station" among present day singers. If he may be said to have poetical masters, they are Wordsworth, Shelley, Tennyson, and Matthew Arnold. These four he has most fittingly commemorated in "Wordsworth's Grave," "Shelley's Centenary," "Lachrymae Musarum," and "In Laleham Churchyard." The poem on Wordsworth is undoubtedly Mr. Watson's masterpiece. Its metre is the same as that of Gray's famous poem, which it resembles somewhat in feeling and subject. Gray speculates on life, our poet on poetry; the former's elegy appeals, therefore, to all classes, the latter's only to the intellectual few. In the dedicatory stanzas Wordsworth is thus characterized:

It may be that his manly chant, beside  
    More dainty numbers, seems a rustic tune;  
It may be, thought has broadened since he died  
    Upon the century's noon;  
It may be that we can no longer share  
    The faith which from his fathers he received;  
It may be that our doom is to despair  
    Where he with joy believed; —

Enough that there is none since risen who sings  
    A song so gotten of the immediate soul,  
So instant from the vital fount of things  
    Which is our source and goal;  
And though at touch of later hands there float  
    More artful tones than from his lyre he drew,  
Ages may pass ere trills another note  
    So sweet, so great, so true.

In the main body of the poem occur these exquisite lines:

Poet who sleepest by this wandering wave!  
    When thou wast born, what birth-gift hadst thou then?  
To thee what wealth was that the Immortals gave,  
    The wealth thou gavest in thy turn to men?  
  
Not Milton's keen, translunar music thine;  
    Not Shakspeare's cloudless, boundless human view;  
Not Shelley's flush of rose on peaks divine;  
    Nor yet the wizard twilight Coleridge knew.

What hadst thou that could make so large amends  
 For all thou hadst not and thy peers possessed,  
 Motion and fire, swift means to radiant ends?  
 Thou hadst, for weary feet, the gift of rest.

\* \* \* \* \*

No word-mosaic artificer, he sang  
 A lofty song of lowly weal and dole.  
 Right from the heart, right to the heart it sprang,  
 Or from the soul leapt instant to the soul.

But as fine as the eulogy on Wordsworth are the stanzas  
 that sketch English poetry just before his time. Two will  
 serve as examples :

A hundred years ere he to manhood came,  
 Song from celestial heights had wandered down,  
 Put off her robe of sunlight, dew, and flame,  
 And donned a modish dress to charm the Town.

\* \* \* \* \*

From dewy pastures, uplands sweet with thyme,  
 A virgin breeze freshened the jaded day.  
 It wafted Collins' lonely vesper-chime,  
 It breathed abroad the frugal note of Gray.

"Shelley's Centenary" is as fervent and full of vigor as  
 "Wordsworth Grave" is dignified and full of calm. Did  
 the poet intend by this to indicate the characters of the two  
 men? In the measured lines of the last poem one feels the  
 "sweet calm" of Wordsworth ; in the quick, sharp lines of  
 the first one, can almost hear the beating, in the void, of  
 those "luminous wings." These two stanzas depict Shelley  
 with fine power :

Alike remote from Byron's scorn,  
 And Keats's magic as of morn  
 Bursting forever newly-born  
 On forests old,  
 Waking a hoary world forlorn  
 With touch of gold,

Shelley, the cloud-begot, who grew  
 Nourished on air and sun and dew,  
 Into that Essence whence he drew  
 His life and lyre  
 Was fittingly resolved anew  
 Through wave and fire.

The success of Mr. Watson's ode on the Laureate has been spoken of, and the poem is another instance of his metrical skill. So many memorial poems smell of the lamp that one appreciates the more the freshness and originality of these lines :

Low, like another's, lies the laurelled head :  
The life that seemed a perfect song is o'er :  
Carry the last great bard to his last bed.  
Land that he loved, thy noblest voice is mute.  
Land that he loved, that loved him ! nevermore  
Meadow of thine, smooth lawn, or wild sea-shore,  
Gardens of odorous bloom and tremulous fruit,  
Or woodlands old, like Druid couches spread,  
The master's feet shall tread.  
Death's little rift hath rent the faultless lute :  
The singer of undying songs is dead.

"In Laleham Churchyard" is the least noteworthy of the four memorial poems, yet if there is any English poet that Mr. Watson closely resembles, it is Matthew Arnold. A comparison would be invidious, but both, it seems to me, have the same note — a discontent with present conditions, a high seriousness of style, an instinct for higher thinking and living. Watson is pessimistic at rare intervals only, and one realizes that his verse reflects his character — the keen, polished scholar, the astute and yet sympathetic critic, the lover of musical effects, the believer in a higher and broader culture. Both poets are noted for exquisiteness of finish, but Watson has a better idea of melody. It only remains to be added that Arnold's scope is much wider, and his glance into things poetical deeper.

Before leaving the subject of Mr. Watson's poetry, it may be of interest to note his views of the province of poetry and of his own work. In "Wordsworth's Grave" there is a stanza that evidently shows his attitude towards the poetry of the present :

I hear it vouched the Muse is with us still ; —  
If less divinely frenzied than of yore,  
In lieu of feelings she has wondrous skill  
To simulate emotion felt no more.

In two of his epigrams he thus describes the poet's work :

The poet gathers fruit from every tree,  
 Yea, grapes from thorns and figs from thistles he.  
 Pluck'd by his hand, the basest weed that grows  
 Towers to a lily, reddens to a rose.

---

His rhymes the poet flings at all men's feet,  
 And whoso will may trample on his rhymes.  
 Should Time let die a song that's true and sweet,  
 The singer's loss were more than match'd by Time's.

Another epigram expresses his feelings towards pessimistic poetry, though once or twice he fails to practice what he preaches :

Enough of mournful melodies, my lute !  
 Be henceforth joyous or be henceforth mute.  
 Song's breath is wasted when it does but fan  
 The smouldering infelicity of man.

But the most interesting passage of all is the one in which he explains the reason of his "frugal note" :

The mighty poets from their flowing store  
 Dispense like casual alms the careless ore ;  
 Through throngs of men their lonely way they go,  
 Let fall their costly thoughts nor seem to know.  
 Not mine the rich and showering hand, that strews  
 The facile largess of a stintless Muse.  
 A fitful presence, seldom tarrying long,  
 Capriciously she touches me to song —  
 Then leaves me to lament her flight in vain,  
 And wonder will she ever come again.

But it is not alone as a poet that Mr. Watson should claim our attention. He is also a critic of acuteness and ability. He has not the startling paradox of Matthew Arnold, nor the bombastic extravagance of Mr. Swinburne, nor the exuberant diction of Lowell. Unlike these, he has written no prose that will be remembered alongside of his poetry, if not after it is forgotten. Yet his modest volume of "Excursions in Criticism" gives him a respectable place in the ranks of living critics, such as Gosse, Lang, and Dobson, the members of a school that is noted for breadth

of theme, versatility of scholarship, and accuracy of criticism. Why these poets should resort to criticism has been well explained by a writer in the *St. James Gazette*: "Our poets nowadays turn critic much as young women give up the pianoforte when they take to housekeeping. It is the pressure of prosaic necessity." Mr. Watson possesses one refreshing characteristic of this school — independence of judgment, unhampered by the fashionable standards of the day. Great names do not frighten him. While praising Matthew Arnold's poetry in one essay, he does not hesitate to cut at him in another; as when he speaks of "that absence of all just sense of proportion which distinguishes a contemporary school of criticism — a school whose loudest, most voluble apostles are capable of naming Villon in the same breath with Dante." Browning does not awe him. In "Dr. Johnson on Modern Poetry" the lexicographer is made to say; "Browning could read men. The pity is, men cannot read Browning." And again in the same connection in the criticism on "Mr. Meredith's Poetry": "Such tolerance of obscurity and vagueness has never before been witnessed. Browning is the most obvious illustration. Had Browning's poetry appeared in any other critical age than our own the best accredited judges would have said, 'This writer has not mastered the elementary art of making his meaning plain; he expects *us* to disentangle the threads which he declines to take the trouble of untangling for us' — but our contemporaries patiently plod their way through jungles of contorted and tormented language, and seem rather to enjoy the exercise."

The best of Mr. Watson's essays are "Some Literary Idolatries," "The Lancashire Laureate," "Mr. Hardy's 'Tess'," "Ibsen's Prose Dramas," and "Dr. Johnson on Modern Poetry." In the first named essay occurs a passage that is a companion piece to his characterization of eighteenth century poetry in "Wordsworth's Grave." It is worthy of insertion entire: "The splendid Elizabethan age of literature met the appropriate fate of a spendthrift.

Prodigal of its wealth and vigor, and wasting its substance in emotional and intellectual riotous living, it had reached a fantastic senility in the school of the Concettists ere it finally sank into that unhonored grave, which a flippant generation made haste to desecrate and to dance upon. After an interval of transition, there arose the strong, brilliant, self-assertive age of clear sense and apt expression, the age which banished romance and mystery, and which, after a protracted reign, was itself deposed by the returning exiles. The close of the eighteenth century witnessed a poetic revival, and then a small band of enthusiasts cleared away the overgrowth of brambles from the neglected grave of the magnificent spendthrift, and built in their stead a monument of splendid praise. But the monument has been carried towering up and up till one cannot refuse to believe that it has at last reached the perilous height which threatens it with the fate of other Babels."

Mr. Watson's opinion of "Tess" will not in all likelihood be challenged: "Tess must take its place among the great tragedies, to have read which is to have permanently enlarged the boundaries of one's intellectual and emotional experience." Nor will a sane person dispute these dicta on Ibsen: "To those enthusiasts, however, who would place him on an equality with the greatest dramatists, sane and sober criticism can only reply: 'No; this narrow intensity of vision, this preoccupation with a part of existence, is never the note of the masters. They deal with life; he deals only with death-in-life. They treat of society; he treats only of the rottenness of society. Their subject is human nature; his, human disease.' . . . Artists like Ibsen turn the House of Life into a moral hospital, and see nothing in men and women but interesting 'cases.' . . . That his own aim is passionately moral I do not doubt, but wisdom, it seems to me, lies somewhere midway between this determined pessimism and the contrary spirit which is forever singing, 'God's in his heaven — all's right with the world.' All is *not* right with the world; but, then, neither is all

wrong with the world, as Ibsen would apparently have us believe."

But Mr. Watson crowds his best things in the way of prose criticism into a fascinating imaginary conversation on modern poetry between Dr. Johnson and an interviewer in the Elysian Fields, A. D. 1900. The whole paper has to be read in order to be appreciated, and in this respect it defies quotation.

Mr. Watson is not without his faults, both in poetry and criticism, but as, to quote him again, "it is always easier to be obscured and confused than transparent and simple," so it is easier to pick flaws in a poet and critic than to notice the many beauties of his versé and the acuteness of his criticism. This is doubtless due to ours being an age of intellectual fault-finding and general dissatisfaction with hitherto accepted standards. But in writing of Mr. Watson one cannot forbear calling to mind Steerforth's last request to David to "think of him at his best." And Mr. Watson's best, whether in prose or verse (and particularly the latter), is worthy of all praise and remembrance. The world will not willingly let die the many beautiful lines he has given us, for nowhere else during the last decade do we find a truer interpretation in verse of poetry itself—a "criticism which is poetry itself,—which, by the very means of recalling something that is precious, places by its side another treasure for the memory."

CHARLES HUNTER ROSS.